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SHELLEY'S *CHARLES THE FIRST*

Shelley was one of those poets who apparently never thought either of destroying or carefully preserving their fragments. He was a modest man in the estimate he put upon his own work, and his own generation did little to encourage him to preserve even his completed works, not to mention those left unfinished. Nevertheless there are few English poets whose collected works show such a large proportion of fragments. Between one-fourth and one-third of the Woodberry edition is taken up with poems of this class. Shelley was characteristically fitful and impulsive about beginning a poem, just as he was in undertaking his various "practical" projects. The plotting of longer poems was undoubtedly difficult for him. The indifference or antagonism of the public was at times depressing. These facts, together with the inconstancy of his nature, easily suggest why so many poems were begun and never finished. The survival of the fragments is the result of Mary Shelley's religious regard for all the poet's relics, and their availability to the scholar is due chiefly to the painstaking devotion of such earnest Shelleyans as Dr. Garnett and Mr. Buxton Forman.

In themselves it is doubtful if most of these fragments add much to the total value of Shelley's work simply as poetry, but in their connections some of them are worthy of more attention than they have yet received. Most prominent in this class is *Charles the First*, which represents an earnest attempt to write successful acting drama after the composition of *The Cenci* and has a significant bearing on Shelley's dramatic ambitions. Had the play been successfully concluded it is not at all unlikely that Shelley would have turned his attention definitely, for a time at least, to the writing of drama.

Charles the First was written at various times between January and June, 1822, but the idea of the play had been in Shelley's mind since 1818. According to Mary Shelley, he advanced but slowly with it and finally threw it aside for *The Triumph of Life*, which he left unfinished at his death. There

are frequent allusions to this drama in Shelley's correspondence which make it clear that this was one of his favorite and most ambitious projects.¹ Before he had himself entertained the idea of writing a drama on the subject of Charles I he had urged Mrs. Shelley to undertake the task, and she had apparently done so.² Mrs. Shelley abandoned the play "for lack of the necessary books of reference,"³ and Shelley himself took up the idea later. An ulterior object of the play was to procure £100 to lend to Leigh Hunt.⁴ Shelley intended making it a careful, finished play, adapted to the stage, and free from partisan feeling. He writes to Leigh Hunt that if he can finish *Charles the First* as planned it will surpass *The Cenci*,⁵ and assures his publisher, Ollier, that if finished it will be a good play.⁶ He tells Trelawny⁷ "I am now writing a play for the stage. . . . In style and manner I shall approach as near our great dramatist as my feeble powers will permit. *King Lear* is my model."

But there were difficulties upon which it seems Shelley had not counted. He had never been able to interest himself in English history⁸ and he found his plotting more difficult than he had anticipated.⁹ He tells Peacock that it is "a devil of a nut to crack."¹⁰ Finally he tells Hunt and Gisborne that he does nothing with *Charles the First* because there is nothing to inspire him to undertake any subject deeply and seriously.¹¹ Medwin comments¹² on Shelley's sporadic manner of writing *Charles the First*, his difficulties, and his final abandonment of the play. "Nothing," says Medwin,¹³ "could so far conquer his repugnance as to complete it."

¹ R. Ingpen: *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 608, 626, 805, 857, 872, 916, 928, 872, 916, 928, 930, 934, 945, 955, 957.

² Ingpen, 626. See also Mrs. Shelley's note to *The Cenci*.

³ Mrs. J. Marshall: *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 217.

⁴ Ingpen, 945.

⁵ Ingpen, 934.

⁶ Ingpen, 857, 916.

⁷ E. J. Trelawny: *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author*, 79.

⁸ Ingpen, 608.

⁹ Ingpen, 965.

¹⁰ Ingpen, 928.

¹¹ Ingpen, 945, 977.

¹² Thomas Medwin: *Life of Shelley*, 340-343.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, 221.

The fragment has received very little attention from critics. Dowden rather slights it in his *Life of Shelley*, merely quoting from Shelley's letters and commenting that the play contains admirable dramatic writing but contains no evidence of becoming a well-built tragedy.¹⁴ Smith's *Critical Biography* devotes six pages to defending the dramatic character of *The Cenci* but contains never a word about *Charles the First*. Rabbé's *Shelley—His Life and His Works*, Helene Richter's *Shelley*, and H. Druskowitz's *Shelley* merely mention it in passing, without considering its merits. Rossetti's *Memoir of Shelley*, Symonds's *Shelley*, and Sharp's *Life of Shelley* ignore it completely. A. Clutton-Brock treats it rather perfunctorily¹⁵ and concludes that the scenes "contain a good deal of eloquent talk, but there is no movement and little character in them." The fragment is more adequately treated by John Todhunter, Stopford Brooke, and H. S. Salt. "As far as it goes, *Charles the First* is a striking and powerful attempt," concludes H. S. Salt.¹⁶ Stopford Brooke¹⁷ finds it "full of steady power, power more at its ease than in *The Cenci*," and Todhunter sketches the characters in the play and discovers many indications of a high dramatic quality.¹⁸ Dr. E. S. Bates, in *Shelley's The Cenci*, devotes considerable space to the discussion of Shelley's possibilities as a dramatist, but dismisses *Charles the First* with a half-paragraph of less than a dozen lines.

When we consider that *Charles the First* is after all only a fragment we need not wonder that so many writers on Shelley have passed it by without examination or without comment. But it is a fairly large fragment, of two complete and three incomplete scenes, totalling over 800 lines. It was the object of rather considerable and anxious thought on the part of the poet. It was written after *The Cenci* and was intended for the stage. It was Shelley's only attempt at practical drama after *The Cenci*, and his letters show that it was a serious, thoughtful attempt. When these facts are considered, *Charles the First* becomes an important piece of evidence on the moot question

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, ii, 476.

¹⁵ *Shelley—The Man and the Poet*, 268.

¹⁶ *A Shelley Primer*, 77.

¹⁷ Preface to *Selections from Shelley*, xlix.

¹⁸ *A Study of Shelley*, 271-281.

of Shelley's ability to develop into a great dramatist. And this fact, in turn, makes it worth while to attempt to discover just why the drama was not finished.

The reasons ordinarily assigned are that Shelley either lacked the constructive ability and power of continued application necessary to complete the play or that his distaste for the study of history was so great that he was unable to master his material. The first view is supported by the lack of structural unity found in many of Shelley's longer poems, by the long list of his other poems left incomplete, by the apparent dilatoriness with which Shelley treated the project, and by Shelley's own admissions that the play was providing such difficulties that he could not "seize upon the conception of the subject as a whole."¹⁹

It is also a matter of record that Shelley disliked history. Rosetti²⁰ quotes two utterances of Shelley on the subject of history:

"I am determined to apply myself to a study that is hateful and disgusting to my very soul, but which is above all other studies necessary for him who would be listened to as a mender of antiquated abuses—I mean that record of crimes and miseries, history." (1812)

"I am unfortunately little skilled in English history; and the interest that it excites in me is so feeble that I find it a duty to attain merely to that general knowledge of it which is indispensable." (1818)

Against this evidence we must bear in mind the fact that Shelley did accomplish in *The Cenci* a task of construction somewhat similar to that which *Charles the First* presented, though not so difficult in the nature of its materials. It might be added that *Prometheus Unbound* was successfully resumed after an interruption and that the twenty days between Shelley's admission that he had ceased working on *Charles the First* and the date of his death was not a sufficient lapse of time to show that the play had been abandoned. As for Shelley's professed aversion for history, it is a matter of record that he was by no means negligent of historical reading. Of the fifty-one books listed by Mrs. Shelley as read by Shelley in 1815²¹ eighteen are historical or biographical, twenty-one are poetry, and the

¹⁹ Ingpen, 955.

²⁰ *Memoir of Shelley*, 133.

²¹ Mrs. J. Marshall, *op. cit.*, 123.

remaining twelve are of a dramatic, philosophical, or sociological character.

Thus there is not sufficient evidence to show that Shelley abandoned *Charles the First* on account of inability to complete it, or even that he had definitely abandoned the play. A more reasonable hypothesis to go upon is that Shelley would probably have returned to the play later. It is well known that during his last days Shelley suffered under considerable depression of spirits. *Hellas*, he writes to John Gisborne, was written in "one of those few moments of enthusiasm which now seldom visit me and which make me pay dearly for their visits,"²² and in the same letter he remarks, "I write nothing but by fits." When a man who feels himself unappreciated by his public and who is, in addition, too depressed to compose to advantage, throws aside a piece of work on which he has expended the preparation Shelley gave to *Charles the First*, it is more reasonable to suppose that he will return to it later than that he has finally abandoned it. Shelley required enthusiasm to sustain him in his work. *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* furnished subjects on which he could easily become enthusiastic, but *Charles the First* offered some complications in the usual formula of Shelley's sympathies. The Roundheads as lovers of liberty could appeal to his enthusiasm, but as religious bigots they must have repelled him. Cromwell the liberator was adaptable enough to the Shelleyan formula, but Cromwell the despot offered awkward complications. Whether or not he could have overcome this conflict of sympathies is a question that cannot be answered, but the fact that the complications existed must have had its influence in causing him to desist from the play.

When we examine the scenes singly for evidences of dramatic power or weakness, we find the first scene probably the best of the five. It shows an eye for theatrical values that is surprising in one with so little actual knowledge of the stage as Shelley had. As an opening scene for a historical play it could hardly be improved upon. The key to the dramatic struggle is revealed at once by the dramatic contrast of royal splendor with Puritan sourness. The masque, with its spectacular value of

²² Ingpen, 953.

color and movement, gives evidence of an eye for theatrical effectiveness that one would hardly have suspected Shelley of possessing. It is as theatrically effective as the masques in the Elizabethan plays from which Shelley doubtless got the idea. The entry of Leighton, a victim of royal tyranny, gives additional point to the complaints of the citizens. The dialogue is at least as dramatically effective as that of *The Cenci*. The characters are carefully distinguished. The first citizen is moderate in his opinion and talks little. The second citizen, an old man, is a bitter and uncompromising hater of Court and Church, and voices his invectives without restraint. The third citizen chimes in with the second, and the youth is a visionary with an eye single to beauty. In general the scene is somewhat comparable to Shakspeare's opening scene in *Julius Caesar*, but Shakspeare's speeches are shorter and more realistic, and his scene concludes with a promise of further vigorous action, whereas the conclusion of Shelley's scene does not point directly to any subsequent related action.

The second scene contains 502 lines. It contains practically no action such as would advance the drama. Like the first scene, it is introductory and expository. The King, the Queen, Laud, Strafford, Cottington, St. John, and the Fool, Archy, are introduced and made to reveal something of their characters.

Charles is weak, but not utterly bad. There is a nobility, a gentleness and grace about him that makes a wistful and poetic, rather than a heroic appeal. The Queen is clear-sighted, ambitious and autocratic, but she loves Charles and their children—a Shelleyan Lady Macbeth. She manages Charles with the greatest ease. Strafford is thoroughgoing in his hatred of the people, but is apparently sincere in his loyalty to the King. Laud, however, is a bigot of the most vengeful and cruel type; there are strong indications that had the play been finished he would have been made into an inhuman type of Evil in the form of religious bigotry, just as the Jupiter of *Prometheus Unbound* may be said to typify abstract Evil and Count Cenci Evil in the concrete. The Fool is fashioned after the fool in Calderon's *Cisma de Inglaterra* and the fool in Shakspeare's *King Lear*. He resembles Lear's fool, however, only in his understanding of the real situation; there is no comparison between the two as to wit. In exaggerated Romantic

fashion Charles is made to attribute a kind of super-rational insight to the Fool, on the score of his being a little crack-brained. Shelley even imitates the anachronisms of the Elizabethans and makes the Fool crack a jest on pantisocracy—this for the benefit of the Lakers. The King consents to the bloody stamping out of the Scotch revolt. The attitude of the King's side is made clear in this scene. Thus at the end of 692 lines Shelley has made the audience familiar with the nature of the conflict, the attitude of each side, and the principal forces on one side. He has prepared for the first clash—the expedition against the Scots—but he has failed to motivate the action. The forces that are to work on the King's weakness and produce his ruin are made evident in this scene. They are the pride and ambition of the Queen, the veengeful fanaticism of Laud, and the fierce intolerance of Strafford.

The third scene is incomplete. It is a Star Chamber trial and shows the first actual conflict between the opposing forces. It also further develops the character of the chief villian, Laud.

The fourth scene, also unfinished, shows Hampden, Pym, Cromwell, Cromwell's daughter, and Sir Harry Vane on the point of flight to America. Their arrest, which would have provided action for the scene, is not reached. The fifth scene is a mournful song by Archy, and was probably intended to be the last scene, after Charles' execution.

Shelley's further plans for the drama are to be found in the third of his notebooks. As deciphered by Forman, the whole plan is as follows:²³

ACT 1ST The Mask

Scene 1. St. — Bastwick & citizens—to him enter Leighton: & afterwards An old man & a Law Student.

Scene 2. The interior of Whitehall—The King Wentworth, Laud, L^d Keeper Coventry Lord Essex Archy to them enter Dr. John, Noy, & the lawyers—circumstances indicative first of the state of the country & Government, & the demands of the King and Queen, Laud &c. secondly of the methods for securing money & power.

²³ *The Shelley Notebooks*, privately printed, edited by H. B. Forman, iii, 103.

Scene 3.^d Pym, Hazelrig Cromwell, young Sir H. Vane, Hampden & — their character and intentions—a their embarkation—Cromwells speech on that occasion—high commission pursuivants.

Messengers of council.

The imprisonment of members of Parliament. Lauds excessive thirst for gold & blood. Williams committed to the Tower to whom Laud owed his first promotion

ACT 2^d Scene 2

Chiefs of the Popular Party, Hampden's trial & its effects—Reasons of Hampden & his colleagues for resistance—young Sir H. Vane's reasons: The first rational & logical, the Second impetuous & enthusiastic.

Reasonings on Hampden's trial p. 222.

The King zealous for the Church inheriting this disposition from his father.

This act to open between the two Scotch Wars.

Easter day 1635

The reading of the Liturgy

Lord Tiquai

The Covenant

The determined resistance against Charles & the liturgy—Worse than the worse is indecision

Mary di Medici the Queen came to England in 1638. it was observed that the sword & pestilence followed her wherever she went & that her restless spirit embroiled everything she approached.

.....
The King annulled at York

Many unlawful grants &^c in wh

This concludes Shelley's plan, but at the top of one of the pages is pencilled:

ACT 2

After the 1st Scottish War
and at the bottom:

The End—Strafford's death.

It is hardly worth while to enter into a detailed discussion of this plan. It shows that Shelley had planned the drama beyond the point where he ceased writing. Scenes III and IV as written are amplified and modified from the plan for scene III,

and the later scenes of the poem as written are not accounted for in the plans at all. This is an indication that Shelley followed his plans very loosely and is supported by the plan itself, which is disorganized and includes what seems to be data from his reading about Mary di Medici, along with a line, "Worse than the worse is indecision," which looks like the text for a contemplated speech. That Shelley had nearly finished one act, according to his plans, without having planned in advance more than one scene of the next act is a strong indication that he was having serious difficulty with the plotting.

The drama contains some speeches fully comparable to those of *The Cenci*. The attack on the nobility by the Second Citizen,²⁴ the impassioned lines on liberty spoken by Hampden,²⁵ and Archy's song are the best speeches. The trial of Bastwick in scene iii is the best sustained passage of dramatic verse.

The speeches have the peculiar Shelleyan intensity of feeling that characterizes the blank verse of Shelley's other plays. There is also present the touch of Shakespearean diction encountered in all the other plays except *Prometheus Unbound*. "Vile participation" (I, 79), recalls Shakespeare's use of the expression in *I Henry IV*, III, ii, 87. "Withal" in the sense of "with" in "catch poor rogues withal," (I, 160), is like the Shakespearean use of the word in such expressions as "bait fish withal" etc. Archy's "your quiet kingdom of man" suggests *Julius Caesar*, II, i, 68, "The state of man like to a little kingdom," also *Macbeth* I, iii, 140. King Lear's comment, "a bitter fool" (I, iv, 150), is reflected in the Queen's "Archy is shrewd and bitter," II, 460. Hampden's passionate speech on liberty in scene four owes something to Gaunt's famous patriotic speech in *Richard II*. There are indifferent puns in the Shakespearean manner and a number of lines with only an indefinite Shakespearean suggestiveness, such as "the base patchwork of a leper's rags" (I, 234), and "Thou perfect, just, and honorable man" (II, 319).

We may say of the fragment of *Charles the First* that it is at least equal to *The Cenci* in its use of dramatic blank verse, and that in it Shelley shows an increased skill in individualizing

²⁴ I, 150-175.

²⁵ IV, 14-36.

minor characters. It shows an increased ability to motivate the action and a closer attention to stage effects. Yet it shows also a failure in the only humorous character attempted, and its action is certainly slow in getting started. Shelley's notes on the drama very significantly say a good deal more about speeches and reasons and less about actions than might be expected. Shelley's plans and letters show that the structure gave him difficulties, and the three consecutive scenes of the first act, while no more loosely connected than many an Elizabethan chronicle play, are certainly too loosely connected for good acting drama even upon a stage where Elizabethanism had become a fad.

There are available only three English plays with which Shelley's fragment may be compared. Reinhard Fertig, in *Die Dramatisierungen des Schicksals Karls I von England*²⁶ gives brief summaries and discussions of nine English dramas on the subject and mentions two no longer to be found. There is nothing in his thesis that would indicate any connection between Shelley's fragment and any of the other dramas. Only two of these plays, W. Harvard's *King Charles the First, An Historical Tragedy written in imitation of Shakespeare* (1737) and W. G. Wills' *Charles the First, An Historical Tragedy in four Acts* (1875), are available for closer comparison with Shelley. Neither of the plays shows the slightest connection with Shelley's fragment, except that all three are avowed imitations of Shakespeare. Both begin the action at a later point than that reached by Shelley. The first is dull, declamatory, and without sufficient action. Its one would-be tragic scene is merely sentimental. The second has considerably more dramatic merit. The blank verse is good, the play is well constructed, and the characters are well drawn. With Henry Irving in the title rôle, it held the stage for two hundred nights. Structurally it is greatly superior to Shelley's play. Browning's *Strafford*, written for Macready in 1837, though it makes Strafford and not Charles the central figure, should be considered as belonging to the same group of plays. *Strafford* is more compact, more realistic, and more objective than *Charles the First*, yet the individual scenes are harder to understand.

²⁶ Erlangen, 1910.

Charles the First is the more diffuse, ideal, and poetic, and, so far as can be judged from its unfinished condition, would very likely have been structurally inferior to Browning's play. In everything except structure *Charles the First* compares favorably with the other dramas dealing with Charles the First, but structurally Shelley's drama appears inferior.

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